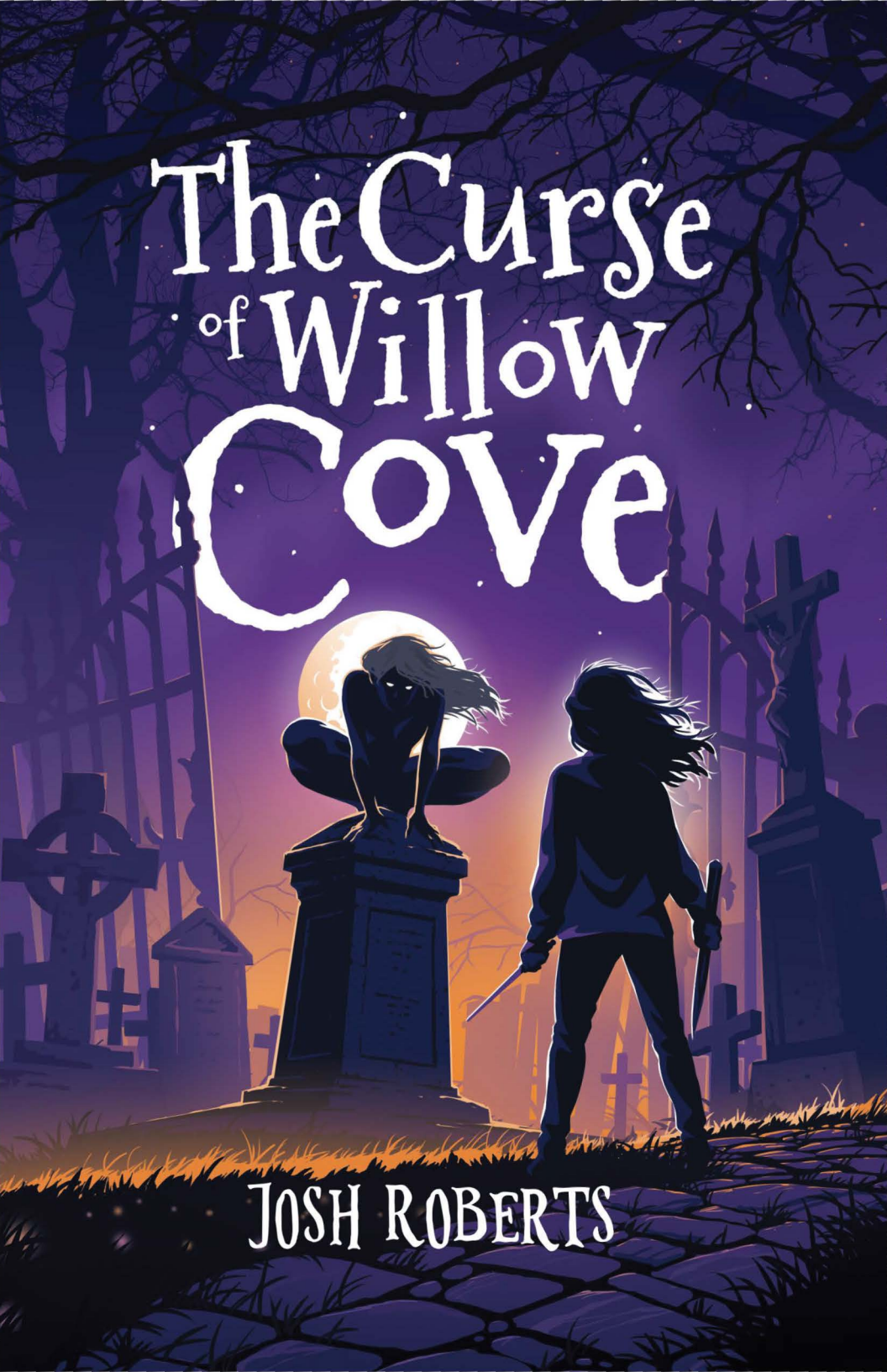


The Curse of Willow Cove



JOSH ROBERTS

THE CURSE OF WILLOW COVE

COMING OCTOBER 8, 2024

THE WITCHES OF WILLOW COVE

BOOK 2

JOSH ROBERTS

OWL HOLLOW PRESS

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is the second novel in *The Witches of Willow Cove* series. You don't need to have read the first one to enjoy this story, but you might find the experience richer and more rewarding if you have.

Whether you're returning to Willow Cove or discovering it for the first time, I hope you'll enjoy yourself. It's a perfectly nice town... at least until the sun goes down.

PROLOGUE

SOMETHING WAS BOTHERING THE CHICKENS. The anxious trilling from the coop was too loud for Lucinda to ignore, even with her bedroom window closed tight and the howling winter wind rattling the glass. She clicked on her bedside light and rubbed her eyes—it was pitch black outside. She *really* did not want to go out there. The hens were her responsibility, though, and if a weasel managed to get into the chicken coop, her dad would have her doing extra chores for months to make up for it.

She threw off her covers and dropped her feet to the cold floor. The window rattled again in the breeze, louder this time. The squawks and clucks of the chickens grew more insistent. With a sigh, she pulled an oversized sweatshirt over her pajamas and padded barefoot down the hallway. She hated this old house. She hated being the weird farm girl with the old-fashioned name who always smelled vaguely of dairy cows and horse manure. Most of all she hated feeling like the only girl in Willow Cove who hadn't been invited to the middle school dance last night. If she could leave it all behind and start over somewhere else, anywhere else, she wouldn't hesitate for even a minute.

Still, the chickens *were* her responsibility.

Downstairs, she sank her feet into her mother's winter boots, clicked on the flashlight her parents kept by the door, and slipped outside into the late January chill. The wind hit her as soon as she crossed the threshold. She dropped the flashlight and swore under her breath as it vanished into a powdery snow-drift. Fumbling around for it, she registered something unusual in the distance. Dim red lights were flickering on and off from the top of the hill on the other side of the salt marsh, the one with all the ghost stories and the creepy name she hated so much.

"Whispering Hill," she breathed, hesitant and low. That's what her best friend Margery Chen called it. All her friends reveled in the rumors that you could hear angry ghosts wailing to be let free from the top of Whispering Hill. Lucinda had always dreaded living so close to it. Who *wouldn't* be a little scared of the crumbling old insane asylum at the top, abandoned but not exactly empty if you believed the stories? She also knew you weren't supposed to call it an insane asylum anymore, but everyone still did—usually right before they'd tell her they wouldn't want to live as close to it as she did.

And now there were weird red lights coming from it!

Probably it was nothing, she told herself. Probably the chickens were just spooked by the wind, nothing more. Definitely nothing to do with those distant lights. Flashlight in hand again, she marched toward the chicken coop, shivering as she walked. The sooner she made sure the hens were okay, the sooner she could be back in her room, in her bed, warm and safe and far away from those strange lights.

But as her boots swished along the snowy path, the lights suddenly grew brighter and... louder? Was that thunder she was hearing? No, probably just some stupid boys sneaking up to Whispering Hill and lighting off fireworks in the middle of a

snowstorm, because that was exactly the kind of thing most of the boys in Willow Cove would consider fun. A prank, just some stupid prank.

Drawing closer to the coop, Lucinda pulled up short. The chickens' clucking was becoming even more fretful. She waved her flashlight at their weathered enclosure. Inside, the hens flapped and scratched at their wood shavings like something was actually wrong. The coop door was still latched tight, but there was a jagged tear in the plastic wrap around the enclosure meant to help protect them from the wind and snow. She leaned closer. The chicken wire had been shredded like paper, too. But by what?

Lucinda did a quick count. One hen was missing. Shuddering, she pushed a heavy bucket against the torn chicken wire—that should keep the remaining hens from wandering out—and waved her flashlight beam around the yard. There were footprints in the snow. Footprints leading from the chicken coop to the horse barn. Footprints that definitely did not belong to her.

Creak.

Lucinda stood stock still.

Was that the barn door?

She leveled her flashlight toward the front of the barn just as something quick and dark flew through the night, a moving shadow beyond the reach of her light. Her breath caught in her throat. There was someone else out here with her.

Or something.

"Just go back to bed," Lucinda whispered to herself. Instead she took an uncertain step toward the barn, then another as a muffled thumping noise rose above the sounds of the chickens, a nervous stomping of hooves on loose shavings. The horses. "Snowball? Delilah?" she called to her two favorites. A low whine came in answer.

As Lucinda neared the barn, she saw it—a sliver of darkness

between the sliding door and the wall. Had her dad left it open by accident? The wind clawed at her sweatshirt as she approached. Sliding the heavy door wide enough to glide through, she felt around for the light switch and flipped it on. “It’s all right, Lucy’s here,” she soothed before pulling up short. The two stalls were side by side, but only Snowball stood snuffling at her over the top of his stall door. The other stall was empty.

“Delilah!”

With her free hand, Lucinda slid Delilah’s stall door open, tears already welling in her eyes. But Delilah was there after all, her chin on the ground and all four legs folded beneath her speckled brown body. Her chest rose and fell with slow and steady breaths.

Sleeping.

She was only sleeping.

Relieved, Lucinda crouched in the straw to brush her hand along Delilah’s velvety muzzle. Even as the horse nickered contentedly, Lucinda blinked, then sniffed. Something in the stall smelled... wrong. An ammonia scent mingled with the earthy smells of hay and feed and manure. Was it a gas leak? A sick animal?

Lucinda pointed the flashlight into the shadowy areas where the light bulb didn’t reach. Nothing. She stood and took a backward step, and as she moved, something thick and hard bumped the back of her boots. She swiveled, then gasped. A *woman* was crouched on her hands and knees in the corner of the stall. A wild mane of raven black hair draped down over her shoulders, so thick and long it covered her body like a cloak. And judging by the movement of her head and neck, the woman was... eating.

“Hello?” Lucinda’s voice trembled. “Are you okay? Can I—can I help you?”

The woman's head shot up. Slowly she turned, and then Lucinda screamed. The missing hen drooped limply between the woman's hands. Blood dripped down the sides of her mouth. Lucinda stumbled backward out of the stall, tripping and falling to the ground on something leathery and soft. Delilah's tack. "Don't come near me!" Lucinda yelled as her fingers searched for something, *anything*, on the wall behind her. Even a hoof pick would be better than nothing. "I—I have a—a weapon!"

The woman's eyes bore into her. They were big and wide and red, hypnotic even, and for a moment or two Lucinda found it difficult to move or even think clearly. Those eyes seemed to be evaluating her, *reading* her. Then a wolfish smile stretched across the woman's face. "Lucccciiiiinda, don't lie to me," she said in a terrifying hiss-purr that made the hairs on Lucinda's neck rise.

For the second time in as many minutes, Lucinda gasped. How did the woman know her name? One of the horses whinnied. Lucinda willed herself back to her feet, to leave the barn and run—sprint!—back to her bedroom. But now the woman's eyes were glowing, spinning, and Lucinda was mesmerized. Paralyzed.

"Who—who are you?" she finally managed. "What are you doing here?"

"I was trapped, but now I am free." The woman's accent was strange and thick, difficult to understand. As she moved toward Lucinda, her limbs stretched like shadows, long and angular and unsteady. Her dark hair framed a face as lovely as it was terrifying. A hint of a smile revealed itself around her bloodied lips. "I will only grow stronger now, Lucinda. You will help me grow stronger."

"I... I will help you," Lucinda repeated, still paralyzed, still mesmerized.

“You will find me sustenance. You will be my eyes and ears in this new world.”

“I will be your eyes... your ears...”

“You will be the first in a new circle of blood, Lucinda, one that is equal to the young witches of Willow Cove.” The woman’s smile grew wider, a slash of white in the shadows. “And then at last I will have my revenge.”

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1
THE HOUSE AT THE END OF
THE LANE

Nine months later

ABBY SHEPHERD JERKED awake as the minivan rattled to a stop. Her friend and adopted sister, Amethyst Jones, drooped against her in the back row, head tilted and mouth open in an exaggerated snore. In the front seat, Abby's mother tapped the steering wheel, smiling tightly as she craned her neck toward the two girls.

"Only got lost twice," Mrs. Shepherd said. "Here we are at last!"

Abby elbowed Amethyst until her friend opened her eyes to the world. It was a cool Saturday afternoon—the last day of October, and Abby's fourteenth birthday. Outside, thick fog shrouded the minivan, but around the edges Abby could just make out the suggestion of a meadow and a hill, and beyond that a tumbledown farmhouse with overgrown shrubs and shuttered windows. A gnarled apple tree came into focus just outside the van as Abby wiped condensation from the window.

"But *where* are we?" Abby asked, brushing red hair from

her face and fumbling for her glasses. “We’ve been driving for hours, Mom.” They were supposed to go apple picking for Abby’s birthday, but her mother had promised they’d be home in time to meet up with Abby’s best friend, Robby O’Reilly, and his girlfriend, Becca Ruiz, at the Halloween fair in Willow Cove. The dashboard clock said it was already late afternoon, so they didn’t have a lot of time to waste here. Wherever *here* was.

Finally finding her glasses, Abby pushed them on. Things didn’t look much better when she blinked through the van window for a closer look. A second car, much nicer than theirs, was parked a short distance away. The top of a wooden signpost poked above its hood, but Abby couldn’t make out any of the words on the sign from where she sat. And anyway, her mother was already opening the driver’s side door and scooting out of her seat.

“Come see for yourself,” Mrs. Shepherd called back to them.

When Abby and Amethyst joined her outside the car, Abby said, “This doesn’t look like an apple orchard.”

Her mother plucked a wormy apple from a low branch and offered it to Abby, looking suddenly very much like a wicked witch who’d stepped out of some old fairy tale. “See, apples,” she said with what seemed like forced cheeriness. “Try one.”

“Hard pass, Mom.”

Amethyst was staring intently beyond the second car. She squinted, pursing her lips. “Abby, the sign says—”

“*There* you are!” came a high, piercing voice from the direction of the meadow. Tall brown grass swayed as a sharply dressed middle-aged woman emerged through the fog, her arms outstretched. She hugged Abby’s mother, then turned to the girls. “You must be the daughters.”

“The very confused daughters. Who are you?”

“Abby, don’t be rude.” Mrs. Shepherd frowned at her. “This is Ms. Delacroix, our—”

“Call me Poppy!” the woman chirped, flashing a set of supernaturally white teeth. “Poppy Delacroix. It’s so nice to *finally* meet you girls. Your mother has told me *everything* about you. Abigail, you are in for a *wonderful* birthday surprise...”

“Mom...?” Abby said, trying to catch her mother’s gaze.

Mrs. Shepherd’s forced smile grew even more strained. Abby turned to Amethyst, whose large brown eyes were trained on something opposite her. “Read the sign,” Amethyst said through gritted teeth.

Abby peered over the hood of the second car, wrinkling her nose as the letters came into focus. “FOR SALE,” she read aloud, her voice rising an octave in question. “What’s for sale? And what’s... ‘SALE PENDING’? Oh, no, Mom, you *didn’t*—”

“I did! Happy birthday, sweetheart. I bought us a new home!”

Abby stared at her mother, wide-eyed, her mouth hanging open. “We can’t move,” she finally managed in a low, stunned whisper. Everything she cared about was back in Willow Cove. Her school. Her friends. Her boyfriend, Zeus Madison.

Ex-boyfriend, a small voice whispered in the back of her mind.

Whatever, she told the voice.

Shaking her head, Abby said, “Mom, we *can’t*.”

“We’ve talked about this, sweetheart. We need a bigger house. I thought you and Amethyst already agreed—”

“But this one is in the middle of nowhere!”

Mrs. Shepherd’s smile faltered. Her shoulders sank, and suddenly she looked as weary as Abby had ever seen her. “It’s what we can afford. I think you girls will like it if you just give it a chance. Come take a look.”

“It will be absolutely *perfect* for you!” Poppy sang, turning on her heel and marching toward a winding stone staircase up the hillside.

“But what about our friends?” Abby asked. “What about Robby?”

“Robby can visit us any time. Every weekend if you want. We’ll have plenty of extra bedrooms.” The wind picked up as they followed Poppy to the top of the hill, thinning the mist enough to reveal a sagging Victorian farmhouse with faded blue paint and a chipped slate roof. Squat, scraggly trees pushed up against a wraparound porch, twining the low railings like vines, nearly blocking the way as Mrs. Shepherd and Poppy climbed the front steps. A barren tree branch poked through one of the first-floor windows, nudging a faded shutter that clung to the side of the house by a single rusty hinge.

Chewing a wad of gum, Amethyst blew a bubble the same purple as her hair and let it pop. “It’s clearly haunted. Your mom bought a haunted house. Do you think she paid extra because today’s Halloween?”

“No, because this isn’t really happening.” Abby wrapped her arms around herself. “It’s a dream. I’m dreaming. We’re still in the minivan and you’re snoring and drooling on my shoulder and any minute now I’m going to wake up and—”

“I don’t snore.”

“You absolutely do.”

“Well, this is absolutely happening, too,” Amethyst said with a dismayed shake of her head. “Unfortunately.”

Abby sighed as she and Amethyst joined the adults at the front door. While Poppy fumbled for the keys, Mrs. Shepherd put one arm around Abby and the other around Amethyst, turning them to look back the way they’d come. The sky was a gray sheet, the cars and meadow below barely visible through the fog.

"I know it's a fixer-upper," her mother said, "but it has good bones."

"More like skeletons," Amethyst muttered.

"We need more space now that there's three of us, and look at this yard. We can finally get a dog. You'd both love a dog, wouldn't you?"

The desperation in her mother's voice made Abby's heart hurt, and she felt her anger soften into something dimmer, something more like a dull ache. She removed her glasses and wiped a damp eye. "Of course we'd love a dog."

Mrs. Shepherd squeezed her shoulder.

The porch creaked beneath their weight, and the whole house seemed to sway. Amethyst cast a skeptical eye in Mrs. Shepherd's direction. "You know, I just realized what this house reminds me of. Abby, don't you think it looks like—"

"Oh!" In the doorway, Poppy dropped her keys with a loud clatter. "Sorry, *sorry!*" she trilled, scooping the keyring back up and trying the door again.

"Mom, seriously," Abby said, "did you... is it... official yet?"

"It'll take a little while for all the paperwork to go through, and we still have to sell our old house. But then yes, it will be official. I hoped you'd be happy. Both of you."

"Oh, Mom."

"You'll like it here. I know you will. You'll be safer, too."

Abby's whole body deflated as all at once she understood what this was really about, why they were really moving. Her mother was worried about their safety in Willow Cove because a girl had gone missing not long ago, and because the same thing had happened about a year earlier. But what Mrs. Shepherd didn't know—what she couldn't know, because Abby had never found a way to tell her—was that the last thing she needed to worry about was her daughters' safety. Abby and Amethyst were witches, and powerful ones at that.

Last year, a few adults, including their mentor Tina, had gone missing when a witch calling herself Miss Winters had involved Abby and her friends in a plot to resurrect her long-dead sisters. That threat was long since over, though, and they could protect themselves now—themselves and everyone around them.

“You don’t have to worry about us,” Abby told her, though she could already tell from the set of her mother’s jaw that it was a losing argument.

“Of course I do. In fact, it’s my job,” Mrs. Shepherd added when Amethyst looked as if she might argue the point. “I know you girls think you’re invincible. That missing girl probably thought she was, too. What was her name, the one who lived on the farm?”

“Lucinda,” Abby said sullenly. “Lucinda Walker.”

“Lucinda Walker, that’s right. The poor girl.”

Abby was pretty sure her mother remembered Lucinda’s name perfectly well. It was all over the television news. No, her mom just wanted Abby to stop and think about the fact that someone in her eighth grade class had gone missing. Mrs. Shepherd waved a hand vaguely in the direction of Poppy Delacroix and the front door and said, “It’s my responsibility to look after you even when that means making hard decisions. *Especially* when it means that.” Her brow furrowed, and she turned to Amethyst for support. “You understand that, don’t you?”

Amethyst shook her head, just a fraction, barely a movement at all, but it was enough to let them both know where she stood.

“I’m doing what’s right,” Mrs. Shepherd insisted. “One day you’ll understand.”

“I’ve got it!” crooned Poppy, jangling the keys triumphantly as the door creaked open. “All right, girls, let’s go have a look at your new home.”

“Give it a chance,” Mrs. Shepherd pleaded. “I know you’ll come to love it.”

Abby spared another glance at the overgrown trees, the broken window, the sagging porch. She had a sinking feeling that her mother had never been more wrong in her whole life. Abby and Amethyst weren’t going to love this new house at all.

Not even a little.

CHAPTER 2

MUSIC OF THE NIGHT

“COME *ON*, Robby, it’s now or never!”

Piper Finch tugged at Robby’s hand. Towering cornstalks swayed at the edge of the Halloween fairgrounds, their rustling louder than the distant carnival rides and crying toddlers. Piper tugged again, trying to get him to join his friends in line for the corn maze. As the line shuffled forward, Robby peered over the tops of heads for Abby and Amethyst, then checked his phone again. Still no sign of them.

“They’re not going to let us in if we wait any longer,” insisted Piper, an owl-eyed Black girl with springy dark curls. She was all but dragging him toward the maze entrance now. “Our tickets are time-stamped.”

Robby allowed himself to be dragged back toward the group. His girlfriend, Becca, wrapped her arms around him, pressing close for warmth. Chestnut-haired Daisy Green and her pale, bookish twin Delphi stared off at the flashing lights of the midway, both craning their necks toward the carnival rides. The giant Ferris wheel at the opposite end of the fairgrounds was a rainbow blur in the distance.

The twins and Piper were half of the coven that also included Abby and Amethyst. Shouting erupted behind him,

and Robby turned to see the final member of his friends' coven, Olivia Edwards, arguing with another girl called Sarika Swann. A prickly blonde cheerleader, Olivia usually pretended not to know any of them whenever they in public. Tonight, Robby didn't mind it so much.

"You go ahead," he told his friends, checking his phone again before pocketing it. "Becca and I will wait for Abby and Amethyst. They're almost here."

Delphi cocked her head at him, her expression curious. "Maybe we should all wait?"

"We haven't the time," said Daisy in a broad British accent she'd picked up at a theater camp in England a few summers earlier. "We'll miss our turn if we stay here any longer."

"That's what I've been saying!" yelled Piper, glancing at her smartwatch.

Robby steered Becca back a few steps. "Let's all meet by the giant pumpkin in half an hour. We can do the haunted hayride together."

"Better make it an hour. I've heard the maze is hard, and *someone*"—Delphi looked meaningfully in her twin's direction—"doesn't think we should use magic to solve it."

Daisy folded her arms. "It wouldn't be sporting."

"An hour it is." Robby pretended not to see Piper's don't-leave-me-alone-with-these-two expression as the trio moved toward the ticket taker. Waving goodbye, he waited until they were inside the corn maze, then said, "Abby just texted. She and Amethyst aren't actually coming. They had some kind of argument with Mrs. Shepherd."

Becca raised an eyebrow. "But you just said..."

"Maybe I'd rather it just be *us* for a little while," he told her.

Weaving her hands inside his jacket, Becca kissed him on the cheek. The subtle vanilla scent of her perfume mingled

with the smells of fried dough and candy apples drifting in from the midway as she pressed close to him. “Maybe I’d like that too,” she said, pink-cheeked and smiling, “but you’ll have to promise to keep me warm. I’m not built for this cold weather.”

“Says the girl from Wisconsin.”

“Says the girl who *left* Wisconsin. The Venezuelan side of me isn’t such a big fan of the fall weather.” Still smiling, she raised her gaze above the corn rows to the colorful trees beyond the maze. “It is pretty, though. The reds and oranges and yellows. Reminds me of where we lived when my parents were still married.”

“It’s the carotenoids and anthocyanins that make the colors,” Robby explained as they moved toward the ticket taker, a bored-looking high school girl with short black hair. “In the summer, the carotenoids are hidden by the green from the chlorophyll—”

Becca squeezed his arm, nuzzling closer. “Less science, more cuddling. I was promised warmth.”

Robby pulled in tighter. “Better?”

“Much. Now, what’s this about carotenoids?”

The high school girl suppressed a yawn as she checked their tickets and ushered them into the corn maze. Piper and the twins had turned right, so Robby went the opposite way on the mucky path. A boisterous wave of music and laughter briefly cut through the night when they rounded the first bend, but the deeper they moved into the corn maze, the more muffled the carnival noises became. Soon only the soft chirr of insects and the rickety rattle of an old metal windmill turning in the breeze filled the night.

When they stopped to get their bearings, a low fog was rolling in off the salt marsh, the wet air carrying with it the briny scent of the ocean. The moon slivered through a gap in the mist to reveal a gray corn silo rising above the cornstalks,

and when it vanished again the night seemed suddenly darker. The carnival rides were well behind them now, the haunted hayride far ahead and through the woods, so that put the old burying ground somewhere to their left, just out of sight beyond the ridge. Not far away, the creaky windmill poked up through the swaying corn, working hard with some unseen purpose.

The further they got from the fairground, the darker it became, until even the fog thickened to blackness. Robby had to turn on his phone's flashlight to avoid tripping on fallen corn.

"We could hide in here for weeks," Becca said wistfully. "No one would ever find us."

"Think of all the homework we could skip," he said, playing along. But something in her expression caught his eye through the dim glow of his phone. The dusting of freckles on her cheeks parted into a weak smile when she spotted him looking at her.

Twirling the Star of David pendant she wore at the nape of her neck, she said, "Robby, there's something I need to tell—"

"Hold on, is that Zeus?" he asked, tilting his phone's light through the cornstalks. Even in the shadowy mist, there was no mistaking the bulky dark-skinned figure with the football player's frame for anyone other than their friend, Zeus Madison.

Former friend, Robby corrected.

Robby, Zeus, and Becca had become thick as thieves while working together to solve the mystery of Miss Winters and her connection to Abby last year. Eventually Zeus had even worked up the courage to reveal his crush on Abby and ask her to the winter dance. But over the summer, something had changed, something Robby couldn't even begin to guess at. Lately, every time he or Becca tried to talk to him, Zeus found a way to avoid them.

Becca pursed her lips as she followed Robby's gaze.

Twining her fingers through his, she said, “He’s all by himself. Let’s go talk to him.”

Zeus’s eyes narrowed when he spotted the two of them. He shined his flashlight in their direction, then lowered it as recognition dawned on his face. For a moment none of them said a word. Finally, Zeus spun on his heels and started down the path without them.

“Zeus, hold on!” Robby called.

Becca let go of Robby’s hand and sprinted ahead. “It’s us, Zeus!”

His shoulders sank with a sigh as he stopped and spun again to face them. Becca reached him first. “Are you all by yourself?” she asked.

“My sisters got scared by a clown, so mom took them home.” His voice was low and sullen. He sank one hand into a pocket and looked at the ground. “Dad’s on duty at the police station, but he’ll pick me up later.”

“Come do the maze with us,” Becca said.

“It’s all right. I’m happy by myself.”

“I promise I don’t bite,” Becca said, keeping her voice light. “It’ll be just like old times.”

Something caught her eye through the mist. Her voice trailed off. Robby saw it, too, a flicker of movement, a pale white face, eyes like glowing red embers. It could have been his imagination—a kid in costume, a trick of the light—but, somehow, he knew it wasn’t. He could read it in Becca’s expression. She’d seen the same thing.

She’d recognized that pale face.

“Lucinda Walker,” Robby breathed. The missing girl. Becca let out a little gasp of confirmation. The two of them sprinted after her and Zeus joined them, grumbling but keeping up. Rough corn stalks scraped at their hands and feet. Wispy silk tickled their faces. They kicked up mud as they ran,

and even though they were going as fast as they could, they were still falling behind with every twist and turn.

They rounded another bend and crashed into something—*someone*—else. Robby fell to the ground as Tommy “T-Rex” Rexman stumbled, then spun around, furious, to see who’d bumped him. Becca helped Robby to his feet, and Zeus pulled up short behind them both, hunched over and breathing hard. T-Rex wasn’t alone. The ruddy-faced eighth grade bully and his best friend, Joey Swett, stood in the middle of the trail with another of their classmates, Margery Chen.

And something was very, very wrong with Margery.

Even as he wiped mud from his hands, Robby registered Margery yanking at her jacket collar, rocking back and forth and murmuring under her breath. Everything about her seemed frantic and unfocused.

T-Rex glared at Robby. “I—I didn’t hurt her. She just started acting like this,” he said, almost like a challenge. “It’s not my fault!”

Robby and T-Rex had never gotten along, and things had only gotten worse last year when T-Rex made it known he had a crush on Becca, too. Robby wouldn’t have put it past him to hurt Margery, but the expression on the bully’s face was pure confusion. T-Rex wasn’t smart enough to fake it that convincingly.

“There’s something wrong with her,” Joey echoed.

“Do you hear it?” Margery’s voice was cold and inscrutable, not at all the warm tone she used at school. Her face was sweaty and paler than usual, almost bloodless. Her gaze flickered this way and that, unfocused and unsettling. She’d taken off her jacket to better claw at her turtleneck, leaving red scratches on her skin. “Do you hear the music? She’s calling me... She needs me...”

Panic rose in T-Rex’s voice. “What is she talking about?”

With a final tug, Margery ripped the turtleneck's collar at the stitches. Her neck was bare and exposed, and Robby recoiled at the sight of it. There were two angry welts, red and raw like a bite mark.

"She needs to go to a hospital," Becca breathed.

T-Rex and Joey both backed up a step. "You take her!" T-Rex ordered. He shoved his friend into the next row of corn. A moment later the pair was gone, their frantic footfalls squelching in the mud as they disappeared.

"Cowards!" Becca yelled after them. "Come back here!"

"I'll—I'll call emergency services," Zeus said, fumbling for his phone. "She definitely needs a doctor."

"She needs *me*," came another voice, barely more than a low animal growl. "My friend. My Margery." Somewhere in the dark, a cornstalk bent and cracked. Lucinda emerged through the neighboring row, her eyes glowing red and bright.

Zeus dropped his phone.

Becca pulled Robby back a step.

An oversized gray sweatshirt hung loosely from Lucinda's shoulders, tattered and streaked with something reddish brown. In the darkness she might have been anyone, only Robby was sure he'd seen Lucinda wear that same sweatshirt before—was sure he'd seen her doodling the same grinning anime cat on the front of it in her algebra notebook a few weeks ago. Her face was whiter than snow, and even her blonde hair seemed to have lost its color. Faster than lightning, she took Margery by the hand and dragged her back the way she'd come. Into the rustling corn stalks. Into the fog and darkness.

"What—what just happened?" asked Zeus, breathless. "What was that thing?"

"That thing was Lucinda!" cried Becca.

Zeus shook his head. "That was *not* Lucy Walker. Not anymore."

“We have to go after them,” Robby said, shining his phone into the corn.

Zeus stared at him. “What? Why?”

“Because Lucinda isn’t missing anymore and she just took Margery with her,” Robby said. “And we’re the only ones who know.”

CHAPTER 3

NIGHT WALKERS

IN THE BACK of the minivan, Abby lowered her window as they reached the exit for Willow Cove. A damp breeze and the familiar mucky smell of the mudflats greeted her. Amethyst slumped against the other window, still snoring. Mrs. Shepherd stared straight ahead at the road, hands at three and nine o'clock on the steering wheel. The radio played low in the background. It was pitch black outside, and Abby was still stewing on the fact that there wouldn't be time to go to the Halloween fair with her friends. Another lie from her mother, right up there with "we're just going apple picking."

Glancing at her phone, she sighed and shook her head. Nothing from Robby since she'd let him know they weren't coming. Her mouth felt dry when she tried to imagine telling him the rest of the story. "We're moving," she whispered, closing her eyes, practicing. "Mom is selling the house. Amethyst and I have to leave."

Amethyst stirred beside her, and Abby's chest tightened a little with guilt. The whole drive home she'd been thinking about how Amethyst was being dragged away from her home, too. If Abby hadn't pushed so hard for her mother to complete

the adoption, Amethyst might have been able to stay in Willow Cove with someone else in the coven.

“Who are you talking to?” Amethyst asked, yawning.

“Myself. You. Robby.”

Amethyst rubbed her eyes. “That sounds complicated.”

“I’m just thinking out loud. Maybe you still have some options.” When Amethyst stared at her blankly, Abby explained, “Do you think Piper’s parents would let you move in with them?”

“Don’t even joke. We’re in this together. Best friends.”

Abby gave her a bittersweet smile. “Sisters, legally.”

“Sisters whose mom has lost her mind.”

“I can hear you,” Mrs. Shepherd chimed in from the front seat.

“I can fix that.” Sitting up straighter, Amethyst slipped a hand inside her jacket and retrieved the thin willow wand she used for casting spells. She flicked her wrist, then whispered, “*Obscuro*, Mrs. Shepherd.”

“Amethyst, no!” Abby yelled, too late. Three wispy strands of light shot from the tip of her friend’s wand toward the front of the minivan. Her mother couldn’t see them, but Abby still flinched when the colorful threads wrapped around the driver’s seat and her mother’s expression slackened to a vacant stare. Mrs. Shepherd would hear nothing but idle chitchat the rest of the way home and remember none of it by the time she went to bed. It was one of the few spells their mentor, Robby’s step-mother Tina, allowed them to use without supervision, but only in emergencies.

“Sorry, had to,” Amethyst said, tucking the wand back inside her jacket. “When I was asleep just now, I dreamed about that new house. Something’s bothering me, Abby. It’s been bothering me since the minute we saw it.” She took a deep breath and leaned in. “Did it seem... familiar to you?”

Abby tried to picture the house again. The sagging porch and overgrown trees. The chipped slate roof. The dark, narrow rooms, the creaking stairs, the stuffy attic. She shrugged. “It looked like every other old farmhouse.”

“Not every farmhouse. Just *mine*.”

Abby blinked. “What?”

“The overgrown trees and bushes disguised it, but the more I think about it, the more I’m certain. It’s an identical copy of my old house.”

Mrs. Shepherd slowed to a stop near the outskirts of town. A dangling traffic light pierced the darkness above the road in a way that had always reminded Abby of a giant floating eyeball. She pulled her gaze away and turned back to Amethyst. “A copy?”

“Maybe that’s normal. Maybe all Victorian farmhouses are the same,” Amethyst said, though she didn’t sound convinced. “But that realtor, Poppy Delacroix, made a big deal about showing us the roof deck.” Amethyst let out a quick breath. “Like she *knew* we’d appreciate it, Abby. Like she knew we’d used the roof deck at my old house to take off on our broomsticks.”

The traffic light changed to green, and Mrs. Shepherd continued through the intersection. A soft rain misted Abby’s face through the half-open window as they passed the old colonial burying ground. Moonlight filtered through the clouds, brightening the barren stretch of road ahead. A few stray leaves floated on the breeze.

“The whole thing is weird,” Abby agreed. She removed her glasses and leaned into the night, feeling the mist on her face, in her hair. She wondered how her mother had picked that house in particular, how she’d found Poppy Delacroix.

Or had Poppy been the one to reach out to her?

Abby wiped her cheeks and replaced her glasses. The

quickest way to end the *Obscuro* enchantment was by directly addressing the subject of the spell, so she said, “Mom, how did you meet Poppy Delacroix?”

In the rearview mirror, Mrs. Shepherd’s expression sharpened. She blinked once as the colorful threads of Amethyst’s spell dissolved around her. “What was that, sweetie?”

“Your realtor, Poppy Delacroix, how did you meet—”

Mrs. Shepherd slammed on the brakes and the minivan fishtailed on the wet road before coming to a stop on the narrow shoulder.

“Mom!”

The squeal of brakes was still echoing in Abby’s head when she saw the two girls frozen like deer in the headlights. The closest one had ghostly white skin, luminous blonde hair, and deep red lips like blood on bone.

Lucinda Walker...?

Their eyes met for a moment across the misty night. It *was* Lucinda Walker, but somehow it wasn’t her, either. At least not exactly. The pallor of her skin was different from the girl Abby had known since kindergarten. Her eyes were different, too. Her tattered sweatshirt was soaked through, but Lucinda showed no sign that she noticed. Rolling the window all the way down, Abby peered at the other girl with her. Another familiar face—Margery Chen. The pair were holding hands, but Margery seemed to be in some kind of trance, drifting and directionless.

Mrs. Shepherd opened her door and stepped into the street. “Are you girls all right? Do you need help?”

Illuminated in the headlights, Lucinda’s mouth curled into a horrible smile. Her canine teeth were grotesquely long and so white they seemed to glow almost as intensely as her eyes. She stared at Mrs. Shepherd for a heartbeat, her red eyes narrowing in calculation, then she darted into the trees along the side of

the road. Margery stared directly at Mrs. Shepherd for another beat before taking off after Lucinda.

Abby tried her door, even though she knew it was still locked. “Mom, that was Lucinda Walker!” she yelled. “The missing girl. Let us out!”

Mrs. Shepherd slipped back into the car and slammed her door shut. “I’m not letting either of you out of this car!”

“We have to go after her,” Abby repeated.

Mrs. Shepherd shook her head. “Under no circumstances, Abigail.” Fishing around for her cell phone, she added, “I’m calling the police.”

Amethyst motioned to her wand, a questioning look on her face. Abby considered their options, but she couldn’t think of any other choice. Lucinda Walker was out there, right now, and whatever had happened to her, whatever had changed her, it looked like the same thing might be happening to Margery, too. Tilting her wand at the car door, Abby sprang the lock and scrambled into the street. Amethyst was right behind her.

“Abby! Amethyst!” Mrs. Shepherd yelled. “Get back in the car right now!”

Abby took a deep breath. They had to move quickly or risk losing track of Lucinda and Margery. It was an emergency. Tina would understand—she’d have to understand. With a fluttery feeling in her chest, she tilted her wand at the open window.

“Abby?” Mrs. Shepherd said.

“*Obedio*, Mom!”

Her mother’s face went slack.

The wand shook in Abby’s hand as she knit the threads of the obedience spell. “Mom, drive straight home,” she said, not quite holding her voice steady. “Lock all the doors and go to bed. Don’t look for us until morning. Forget this ever happened.”

"I'll drive straight home," Mrs. Shepherd repeated. "I'll lock all the doors. I'll forget this ever happened."

The car drifted down the road and disappeared. Abby's stomach churned and she felt as if she might puke. *I can't believe I just... I shouldn't have...*

Amethyst gripped Abby's shoulder, pulling her back into the moment. Her gaze darted to the woods. "You did the right thing. Something isn't right with Lucinda. Did you see...?"

Abby nodded. "I saw it. Those eyes. That smile."

"Fangs, Abby. She had *fangs*! Did she always have fangs?"

"That's definitely new."

"I'll summon backup and catch up with you." Amethyst raised her wand and a shuddery raven leapt off the tip, fluid as a shadow. A winged messenger waiting for instructions.

Abby took off for the dark woods. Wet leaves squished underfoot, and the moon hung like a crooked yellow claw through the tangle of branches. Something thorny nicked her face as she raised her wand. The soft blue glow of her wand-light illuminated the pale figures of Lucinda and Margery vanishing beyond an incline.

Abby sprinted after them. A moment later, Amethyst was at her heels again, breathing hard. They crested the hill and skidded to a stop. Rising from the ground at the bottom of the incline was a black iron fence marking the boundary of the old colonial burying ground. A maze of slanted headstones weaved in and out of the misting fog on the other side. Lucinda and Margery were nowhere to be seen.

Abby led the way down and they both squeezed through a small gap in the fence. Tiptoeing through the wet grass on the other side, they moved between the grave markers, searching for any sign of Lucinda or Margery. A handful of old-growth trees crowded close together, dowsing the cemetery in shadow.

Somewhere, an owl hooted. Abby's gaze flitted toward the noise, her skin prickling.

Anything could be hiding in those branches.

Anyone.

A flicker of movement caught her eye. Squinting into the rain, Abby raised her free hand and mouthed for Amethyst to listen. Heavy footsteps. Twigs snapping. Then a trio of familiar voices reached them through the fog.

"Which way did they go?"

"Did they always move that fast?"

"What if they doubled back toward the corn maze?"

Robby. Becca. *Zeus*?

Abby swayed where she stood as the three of them burst into the open. Robby raised a hand to shield his eyes from Abby's wandlight. Becca and Zeus pulled up short behind him, disoriented.

"Abby?" Robby blurted.

"What are you doing here?" they both said at the same time.

"We saw Lucinda Walker," Abby told him.

"So did we." Robby wiped a rusty wet curl from his eyes. "She took Margery Chen. We have to find them."

"Something tells me that won't be a problem," Amethyst cut in, pointing at a pair of crooked headstones just past Robby, Becca, and Zeus. Two pale figures crouched in the tall grass, both of them staring straight ahead.

Lucinda Walker. Margery Chen.

And their fangs were bared.

"Get behind us!" Abby shouted.

Amethyst positioned herself opposite Abby while Robby,

Becca, and Zeus squeezed together between them. Wind whistled through the cemetery. The trees shook in the breeze. Abby's heart was still thudding from all the running and her face was slick with sweat, but she had a tight grip on her wand and an idea that they might be able to put an end to this—whatever *this* was—fast.

“What’s the plan?” Amethyst called.

“You take Margery. I’ll deal with Lucinda. Defensive spells only?”

“For now.”

“We need to get them help. We need to find out what’s going on.” Abby pointed her wand at Lucinda. “*Suspendo!*”

The binding spell rocketed from her wand in a flash of blue light. Lucinda leapt into the trees—impossibly high, impossibly fast—and Abby’s spell fizzled as it struck a headstone. Hissing, Lucinda dropped to the ground again, her head tilted to one side, her scarlet eyes narrowing as she moved another step closer. Abby tried again. Lucinda dodged to the side, still too quick for the spell to catch her. Her lips were peeled back in a wicked smile. Her fangs glistened in the lingering glow of wandlight.

Amethyst didn’t seem to be having any luck either. “Time for Plan B,” Abby called over her shoulder.

“What’s that?”

“I was hoping you had one, actually!”

Lucinda and Margery were moving in and out of the fog, and the only sign of them from moment to moment seemed to be Lucinda’s glowing eyes, first here, then there—then right on top of them. Abby twisted around just in time as Lucinda sent her rolling onto the wet grass. Lucinda lunged for her neck, but Abby kicked free and snapped her wand back like a whip, discharging what little energy she had left. It was enough to send Lucinda flying out of sight again.

Scrambling back to her feet, Abby wiped mud from her glasses. Robby and Zeus were still with Amethyst, still holding back as Amethyst swept her wand back and forth to keep Margery at bay. Closer to Abby, Becca crouched against a slanted grave marker, then hurried to Abby's side.

"Margery was half mad when we found her in the corn maze, but not like this, not—"

Abby forced Becca down as Lucinda leapt toward her again. This time Abby's spell grazed the girl, and Lucinda let out an angry hiss before vanishing again into the darkness. "Not like what, exactly?" Abby asked.

"She didn't have fangs a few minutes ago!" Becca stared wild-eyed at the trees and grave markers ahead. "She was sick—unfocused, muttering, helpless."

"That's a pretty sudden transformation," Abby said.

"But she had marks on her neck, Abby. I saw them. Maybe this wasn't so sudden. Maybe it had already started."

Before Abby could consider the idea, Lucinda swept into view again. Margery was there too, the pair of them darting between headstones, quick as cats. Abby leveled her wand. She had a spell on her lips when the two girls pulled up short a few paces from her.

"You are the witches of Willow Cove." It was Lucinda's familiar voice, but gravelly and raw from disuse. "The ones the Shadow Lady spoke of. She will complete her circle of blood. She will have her revenge!"

"Abby, something's coming!" yelled Amethyst.

"Something *else*?!"

A sudden gust ripped through the graveyard. Leaves swirled, the mist parted, and Abby turned her gaze toward the commotion just as the rest of her coven burst through the fog, wands aglow. All at once, the night blazed blue with wandlight.

"Enter four witches, stage left!" shouted Daisy.

Amethyst raised a hand in triumph. "You got my raven!"

"Next time just text us. It's easier!" shouted Olivia.

Delphi and Piper skidded to a stop near Robby and Zeus. Olivia completed the defensive circle, the six witches now forming a protective wall around their nonmagical friends. Abby had never been happier to see her coven in her life.

Piper adjusted her glasses. "What are we dealing with here?"

"Lucinda Walker and Margery Chen," Abby said.

"With fangs!" added Amethyst.

"'Tis now the very witching time of night," said Daisy in her practiced accent, "'when churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes—"

"Save the Shakespeare for later, Daisy!" shouted Amethyst.

Abby waved her wand at the darkness. "Daze and Delphi, you two take Margery. Amethyst and I will go after..." Her voice trailed off. Far away, the two lithe figures dipped beyond a shadowy incline and vanished. Abby stumbled forward, half a mind to pursue, but then Becca's hand was on her shoulder, squeezing, holding her there. Abby let out a breath, then another, longer one. She loosened her grip on her wand. Her friends were all there, all safe. Lucinda and Margery were too far away to catch. She slipped her wand into her back pocket.

"Did we scare them off?" asked Piper.

Abby shook her head. Nothing about the way Lucinda had carried herself suggested fear. *You are the witches of Willow Cove*, she'd said. *You are the ones the Shadow Lady spoke of. She will have her revenge.* What did it mean? Who was the Shadow Lady? What could she possibly want revenge for?

Zeus's gaze roved from side to side. "Can we get out of here?"

"I wouldn't mind someplace a little less... cemetery," Amethyst agreed.

“But we won,” said Piper.

Abby shook her head. “We were lucky. Something tells me we’re going to need more than luck the next time.”

“Why does there have to be a next time?” asked Amethyst.

“One way or another,” Abby said, “there’s always a next time.”